THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI MURASOLI MARAN): (a) and (c) As a result of zero based budget exercise of the Government of India, the rates of subsidy under Rubber Plantation Development Scheme have been reduced from Rs. 18,000 per ha. in traditional areas and Rs. 22,000 per ha. in non-traditional areas to Rs. 12,000 per ha. and Rs. 16,000 per ha. respectively.

The subsidy for fertilizers and fungicides available under Productivity Enhancement Scheme has not been reduced.

Decline in Prices of Natural Rubber

5200. SHRI J. CHITHARANJAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that various measures taken so far has failed to stall the fall in prices of natural rubber;

(b) if so, the details thereof and reasons therefor; and

(c) whether Government will consider procuring 50,000 tonnes of natural rubber to stall the further fall in prices?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI MURASOLI MARAN): (a) and (b) As a result of various steps taken by the Government to arrest the decline in the prices of natural rubber, the prices have considerably improved in the last few months and are at present ranging between Rs. 3300-3400 per quintal.

(c) To further improve the domestic prices of rubber, Government have decided to continue the procurement of natural rubber upto 20,000 MT for supply against Advance Licence.

Embargo on Import of American Soda Ash

5201. SHRI R.S. GAVAI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have put 'de facto embargo' on import of American Soda Ash as a result of a temporary injunction imposed by MRTPC in 1996;

(b) whether US Trade Representative has asked for lifting the 'embargo';

(c) if so, the details thereof; and

(d) the reaction of Government thereto?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI MURASOLI MARAN): (a) to (d) Soda ash is classified under Exim Code No. 28362009 of ITCHS) Classifications of Export and Import Items, 1997-2002, and its import is free. The Government of India has not imposed any restriction whatsoever on the import of US natural soda ash in India. Individual US companies are free to export their product to India.

In 1996 Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Commission (MRTPC) passed a temporary in-junction on export of natural soda ash to India by American Natural Soda Ash Corporation (ANSAC). The commission, prima-facie, found that ANSAC was indulging in restrictive trade practices of cartelisation which attracted the provisions of the MRTP Act, 1969. The case pending before MRTPC has not yet been finally decided.

This issue was raised by the United State Trade Representative (USTR) this year. The Government of India has since replied to the USTR. It has been pointed out to the USTR that MRTPC is an independent judicial body and the executive cannot interfere in its functioning.

Creation of Technology/Modernisation Fund

5202. SHRI R.S. GAVAI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government propose to create Technology/Modernisation fund to help the paper industry based on non-conventional raw material;

'(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether Government have received any memorandum from the Indian Agro Paper Mills' Association for various measures for the survival of the domestic paper industry;

(d) if so, the details thereof; and

(e) the action proposed thereon?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (DR. RAMAN): (a) and (b) Government has recently received a representation from a Paper Mill Association for creation of Technology/ Modernisation Fund to help the paper industry. Government has not taken any decision.

(c) Yes, Sir.